

Welcome

On most days, this is my favorite board game. It's called THE THING, and it's based on the 1982 John Carpenter film of the same name. If you haven't seen the film, it's about an Antarctic expedition that finds a mysterious creature in the ice - a creature that consumes a person and then takes their shape.

The tensest scene of the movie is when the remaining survivors are all gathered in the break room. Any one of them could be the thing, and they're all testing each others' blood to determine who among them isn't who they seem.

The board game does a great job of capturing this paranoia - at the start of the game, one person is secretly the thing. Their mission is to sabotage everything, while the remaining players are trying to work together to escape. The catch is that *everyone* is acting human, so you can never trust anyone but yourself.

Except, if you want to win the game you *have to* trust other people. You can't win alone. But you can definitely lose alone. So if you play as the thing, you spend the game trying to sow discord and distrust, to convince people that anyone - and everyone *might* be the thing.

It's a little confusing at first, but once you've played it a couple of times, you realize that it's almost impossible for the humans to win. Which shouldn't be the case and yet... the human players' paranoia makes it difficult and dangerous to trust anyone. Seriously - in all the times I've played this game, I think the humans have one once.

Now, some of you are wondering, "Wait why do you play this game if it's so hard to win?" Great question, and it's because so-called social deduction games like this, for me at least, are much more about the fun of the interaction among players than about winning or losing (though it's still very fun to win, of course).

The rest of you are wondering, "Why are we talking about a game when you can't have game nights right now?"

It's because we're going to talk about rigged games today. In *The Thing* game, you have to be suspicious of everyone because one of them is definitely the Thing. But the more suspicious you are, the easier it is for the Thing player to wreck the humans' chance of survival. So you have to be suspicious, but suspicion is the Thing's main weapon!

At game night, this sort of vicious cycle can make for an uproarious hour of laughs.

In real life, it's incredibly dangerous and painful. We've all experienced the consequences of suspicion, division and the injustices they lead to.

So I want to talk today about how to beat a rigged game. And we'll see a throughline in the scriptures: the way God does it is... by refusing to play. And while that would ruin a game night, it's our only chance for peace and flourishing for everyone here on earth - what the Bible calls justice.

God opts out of a world characterized by rat racing - everyone working to be on top, to enforce their vision of the world. Instead, God invites us into a new, better way to be.

Message

We're in the season of Epiphany! Following our Christmas celebration of God with us, Epiphany asks an important question: who is God? The answer we find in Epiphany is: God is who we meet in Jesus. Another way to say that is: If we want to know who God is, then our very best picture of God is Jesus.

This year, our Epiphany series is called "From A to Z". We're exploring some of the big themes of the Bible, themes that illustrate who God is. This is a series about how Jesus shows us the God who has been at work from the beginning and will keep working to the very end.

We began with the origins of theology: the miracle of life. We saw that because we are relational creatures, we know God to be relational. In Jesus, we meet the God who created us *on purpose, for a purpose*. God desires us to live with God. Next, we saw that to confess God as creator means that God created us to be God's partners in moving the world toward loving harmony. Creation is *invitation*. Last week, we saw that evil's objective is to poison us, to sabotage God's good work in us.

Today, we're exploring how God does God's work in our world. And one of the most common terms we use in our songs and conversations about this is *sovereignty*. The metaphor is God as a king. The language comes from the Bible, of course, and in a world ruled by kings, it was incredibly helpful.

But I've found that, since it's been a couple hundred years since we had a king, there's a disconnect here for us in America. And the reality is, when we picture God's continuing work in the world, how God is present to the world on a daily basis, we don't picture a king (because 'king' isn't a reality any of us has ever lived with).

A lot of us actually lean more heavily on a theology called deism - it was popular in the Enlightenment, and with a number of America's founding fathers. Deism hangs out at the intersection of Science and Theology. It attempts to address the relationship between the two by saying that God created the world but then left it to run on its own - that's why we can discern all these laws and patterns in nature. But deists don't believe God is active and present. We're left on our own.

Throughout this series so far, we've been insisting that the Scriptures' primary concern in confessing God as our creator is not a HOW question, but a WHY question. Not 'where did all this stuff come from?' but 'why are we here and where are we going?'

We're going to keep with that important distinction as we discuss God as the *sustainer* of creation. We're not interested in the *mechanics* of God's continuing presence in the universe, but in the *nature* of nature. What is the most essential reality of the universe? Is it violence and death? Or is it love and life? (You probably have a sense of what God has to say about that already.)

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me to Psalm 93. This is a song that was being sung at least as far back as Solomon's Temple, just after 1000 BCE. That makes it one of the older songs we have in the Bible, and at least 400 years older than the creation story in Genesis 1!

We've mentioned during this series that the Scriptures have preserved a number of creation stories for us, including some in the Psalms. Today, we're going to look at a couple of songs that aren't *exactly* creation stories, but are more like songs that *reference* various (even more ancient) creation stories.

Both of these songs imagine Yahweh, the God of Israel, to be a king. Again, that makes sense - the songwriters lived in a time where every society was a monarchy. If you're going to imagine God as the one in charge of everything, then you'd imagine God to be a king. This is how the Babylonians, Egyptians and Canaanites talked about their gods. It's how *everyone* back then talked about their gods.

And Psalm 93 does something really cool: it pulls some ideas from an older culture - the Canaanite creation story, and subverts them to say something different about Yahweh, their god.

That's not wholly unfamiliar to us today - do you remember that song from 2013 by Maroon 5 called "Payphone"? Adam Levine croons about how he's hanging out around a payphone waiting for his lady to call. But... did you know that by that time, there were about 100,000 payphones left in the entire US?

When's the last time you remember seeing a payphone? When's the last time you remember *using* a payphone? Younger folks with us are thinking, "Ew... that sounds pretty unsanitary."

It was!

Payphones are not an integral part of our culture anymore... but they used to be! They used to be in movies, tv and more - you might remember Clark Kent ducking into a phonebooth to change into Superman!

That doesn't stop Maroon 5 from using that old imagery to capture something for their song.

And in somewhat the same way, Psalm 93 draws on a much older Canaanite song. In case you're not totally brushed up on your Canaanite mythology, the king of the Canaanite gods was Ba'al (which literally translates as 'lord'). And his big nemesis, his archrival, was the sea god Yam. (We've talked about the Babylonian creation epic before, and it's similar. Marduk, the king, has to slay the sea goddess Tiamat to create the world.) The Canaanites pictured Ba'al as a king who waged war. Like Zeus, he was the lord of lightning and storm, shooting bolts of lightning from his divine bow.

For the ancient cultures around Israel, the world was a product of violence. It could only exist because their gods fought to make it so. Without violence, without destroying their enemies, they could not have peace. They believed violence was the path to peace. Their gods built their thrones with violence, and so their human kings kept their thrones with violence.

With all that in mind, listen to this song. You'll hear that king imagery. You'll hear the victory over the seas imagery. What you won't hear is any sense that creation is in danger from these seas. You'll only hear about a God who is supreme over all:

The LORD is king! He is robed in majesty.

Indeed, the LORD is robed in majesty and armed with strength.

The world stands firm

and cannot be shaken.

Your throne, O LORD, has stood from time immemorial.

You yourself are from the everlasting past.

The floods have risen up, O LORD.

The floods have roared like thunder;

the floods have lifted their pounding waves.

But mightier than the violent raging of the seas,

mightier than the breakers on the shore—

the LORD above is mightier than these!

Your royal laws cannot be changed.

Your reign, O LORD, is holy forever and ever. -- Psalm 93

Like Maroon 5 conjuring images of that payphone, the songwriter here invites memories of the Canaanite gods and their battle to make the world. But he leaves out the battle. The seas pose no threat to Yahweh. Unlike Ba'al, he doesn't have to wage war. He is far mightier, and worthy of worship.

This is a powerful, provocative statement about the nature of reality. Even this early in Israel's history, we seem them pushing back against the wisdom of the day, the conviction that said the world is most essential a place of war and violence. To insist that Yahweh sustains the world in a wholly different way from the kingdoms of the world.

That the law of the universe is not violent force but loving invitation.

[Scripture Slide 2] We see that most fully in Jesus' death. We know Jesus was crucified, but what we often miss is that crucifixion was not just execution. The Roman Empire had perfected violence (again, modeled by their gods), and they had lots of ways to execute people. Crucifixion was designed to be a public spectacle. It started with a literal parade, where Roman troops in full armor would parade the victim of crucifixion down the main road of town, so everyone could come see and revel in his

humiliation. And then they were crucified in a public place, left hanging sometimes for *days*. So everyone could see.

The whole thing was a message. Not to the person dying, but to everyone else. Look who your king is. Look what happens if you don't do things our way.

Caesar's way *or else*.

Violence as the way of the world. Rome's peace as long as you do things Rome's way. Rome's peace made possible by Rome's sword.

So those first Christians had to make sense of the reality that Rome crucified Jesus. They turned him into a public spectacle, humiliated and then executed him. If Jesus is God, then how could God allow godself to endure that? Jupiter and Mars would never allow themselves to be humiliated like that.

Those Christians found their answer in the resurrection: by submitting himself to the violent spectacle of crucifixion, God proved that he is the god of Life. If the Cross is Rome's most powerful weapon, then Rome is totally powerless against a God who can raise the dead. And the fearsome machine of Rome's military might becomes a joke - all that work and effort to have their way when God just says, "Live."

We hear that in Colossians 2, where the writer celebrates how the resurrection turned the tables on the powers of sin and death:

You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross. In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross. -- Colossians 2:13-15

The Greek word there "shamed them publicly" is the same word the Romans used to reference the crucifixion parade. In other words, Jesus submitted himself to the violence of Rome precisely to show the world what a world grounded in violence leads to. It *always* leads to death. No matter what.

You can't make peace with war. You can't make unity with violence. Babylon is a lie. So is Caanan. So is Rome. So is every empire that puts its trust in military budgets and the threat of violence.

On the cross, Jesus demonstrated once and for all that God does not beat Rome at Rome's game. God refuses to participate in a broken system. God doesn't play a rigged game. Instead, God showed the whole world that empires like Rome are little more than flailing toddlers throwing a tantrum to get their way. Violence is fundamentally regressive. It's immature. It's anti-human and anti-Christ.

Jesus proved once and for all that the only game in town is the game of love. God's insistent, persistent invitation to life and flourishing. God is present to our world, present in our lives, not with violence but peace. Not with force but gentleness. Not with law but mercy.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus sets a place for us even when we oppose him.

1. When in the last week have I chosen kindness and mercy?
2. When have I tried to benefit myself at someone else's expense?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to put myself first?
4. How can I choose not to run the rat race this week?

Assignment + Blessing